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*A special issue dealing with
America's immediate future*

Smithsonian

A look into our
third century



The communications industry has hardware
that can revolutionize our lives (p. 78)

Smithsonian

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Table of Contents

COVER: Future communications hardware may deliver our newspapers, read our mail, manage our business and arrange face-to-face visits with friends (p. 78).

Illustration by John Huehnergarth

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 6 | The view from the castle: Secretary Ripley believes Americans should face future with humor and optimism |
| 10 | Phenomena on the frontiers of science by James K. Page jr. |
| 20 | What will go on around the Mall by Edwards Park |
| 24 | Picture credits |
| 26 | SMITHSONIAN presents a special issue to celebrate the beginning of America's third century |
| 28 | The pendulum swings as it becomes more apparent that Americans can cross at least one more river
By Rod MacLeish |
| 34 | The United States can keep its own economic growth and continue to lead the world—if it wishes
By Norman Macrae |
| 42 | Perhaps the answer is to think small as our industrial society searches for "appropriate technologies"
By Wilson Clark |
| 50 | Franklin and Jefferson return as ghosts in 20th century
By Edwards Park |
| 52 | Unfortunately, we must decide which species will share our rapidly depleting planet and which will disappear
Text by Thomas Lovejoy, paintings by Jacob Knight |
| 60 | Einsteins of the future probably will not find the freedom of the past in scientific research laboratories
By Daniel S. Greenburg, drawings by Stan Mack |
| 70 | Never before has humankind had to face the problem of feeding so many people with so little food
By Georg Borgstrom |
| 78 | So you think that television is hot stuff? Just wait and see what's coming your way
Text by Erik Barnouw, drawings by John Huehnergarth |
| 86 | Predictive medicine, not far off, is expected to place more of our health care in our own hands
Text by Maya Pines, photographs by Peter Angelo Simon |
| 92 | Plutonium—the "free" answer to our energy crisis or an invitation to a possible catastrophe
By Peter Gwynne |
| 100 | Urban renewal in Atlanta is working because more power is being given to the neighborhood citizens
Text by Charles E. Little, photographs by William A. Allard |
| 108 | By tapping the inner resources of the individual, new opportunities will open up for "underdeveloped" America
By David E. Lilienthal |
| 116 | Books: some recommendations |
| 128 | Additional reading |
| 132 | A whimsical look at ecoliving put into everyday life
By Jan Adkins |

The view from the castle



History proves that there are no snug harbors, Americans, sometimes cynical, should face the future with humor and optimism

This is July, not just any July but *the* 200th. My own feeling is that it is the month to look forward, not back, and this special issue of SMITHSONIAN shows that the editors share this view. I believe we should contemplate the future with ease and good humor.

If this nation has managed so far, it is not because we have now reached a snug harbor and can drop anchor, safe from stormy seas. History makes a mockery of that. But if we look forward, let us do it with confidence supported by a steady view, with equanimity and not anxiety. That is why I speak of ease and good humor.

We gain nothing by deploring the past, wallowing in our failures of leadership or the evidence of venality and corruption that continue to be flaunted in our daily ration of the news. As Thomas Jefferson wrote (in 1807), "I really look with commiseration over the great body of my fellow citizens who, reading newspapers, live and die in the belief that they have known something of what has been passing in the world in their time; whereas, the accounts they have read in newspapers are just as true a history of any other period of the world as of the present, except that the real names of the day are affixed to their fables."

Americans enjoy being cynical, especially about government, and they tend to assume, sometimes with an undercurrent of piousness, that corruption—at least for some—is here to stay. But Americans have enormous resilience. When one considers the state of our country 200—nay 100—years ago, the distance that we

have traversed is stupendous. Poverty, disease, lack of communication and transportation—today, compared with the past, we are at a level of security and technological knowledge never before equaled.

We should take great heart in all this liberation from drudgery and pain, as Philip Abelson recently editorialized in *Science*. And in taking heart, we must retain our sense of balance and face ahead. In this I find museums a wonderful comfort. In a nutshell, in a microcosm, they tell us who we are and where we have come from, as our new exhibits in two of the museums on the Mall demonstrate: one showing where our pride and our thoughts resided in 1876 (SMITHSONIAN, May 1976); the other, "A Nation of Nations" in the National Museum of History and Technology, which shows the great pilgrimage to this country, the saga of immigration, of which we are the fruit.

As Joseph Ewan wrote in his introduction to a library exhibition in 1972, "Museums are too often looked upon as cemeteries of the sciences, but those who live and work in them know them to be a collection of measuring devices to determine from the preservation of observed facts what is new and different."

I am constantly reminded in these days that the museums, especially our newest, the Air and Space Museum (SMITHSONIAN, June 1976), serve as a prelude to the future, a future to be viewed with conviction, a future which has untapped resources to be developed (see David Lilienthal, p.108), and the certain knowledge that we all have a place in it.

There is a mood afoot in this nation today for a return to friendship, to confidence and to optimism for the future. I'll vote for that.

S Dillon Ripley

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